

**The Shield of Colorblindness and Sugarcoated Feminism: the Complexities of
Skin-Color Politics, Misogynoir, and the Depiction of Black Women in the
Media.**



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Introduction

The representation and depiction of black women in the media—visual media, mainstream media, social media— and more generally in U.S.-American pop culture, has been a topic of heated conversation throughout the years in the United States. Recently, largely because of the current landscape of social media, the frequency with which conversations and reactions to the issues of race and gender occur has increased exponentially. In the context of the often negative depiction and representation of gender and race in the media, a series of conversations have been taking place on the issues of racism and feminism. These conversations aim to highlight biases, stereotypes, and the intricacies as well as complexities of the existing inequalities in race and gender relations in the United States. In 2016, skin color politics in U.S society has garnered a lot of attention because of events such as police brutality towards African American men and cyber-bullying of female African-Americans. Also, when Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President, the ideological landscape changed immensely. These series of events sparked a vigorous debate on the issues of race, violence, and gender. Public and political discourse took place on a national level through a series of conversations in the media, especially on social media. As a result, visibility on many issues has increased.

However, the downside with social media is that with the excessive amount of information that is continuously shared, people are overwhelmed by news and events. As a result, they have a shorter attention span; in fact, people pay attention to and react more often to stories that have gone *viral*. This status is reached when an incident has a shock-factor. If it does not, the story gets lost in the newsfeed. Take for example the intensity and frequency of misogynoir on social media: it has become commonplace and, to an extent, normalized. When it is challenged, the challengers are silenced especially if they are women. There is an implicit point in the abuse

that women in general, and women of color in particular, face: they should “know their place.”¹ If women are bold enough to voice their opinions, they will be attacked for it. Unfortunately, these types of remarks, and complaints by the victims, are swept under the rug almost immediately. As a result, the negative representation of women, especially those of color, in the media has, because of its lack of shock value, been largely ignored by U.S. society. This is because, for the most part, U.S. society has been desensitized by the sheer frequency of these images.

This dissertation aims to explore and discuss how racism and sexism, especially towards black women, functions in current U.S. society, how they are inextricably intertwined, why and how they are maintained through specific ideologies (such as colorblindness and non-intersectional feminism), and how the media, authority figures, and key actors play a role in preserving the status quo. Focusing on several recent controversies as case studies, including Beyoncé’s performance at the Super Bowl and the harassment of actress Leslie Jones on Twitter - - and the reactions to these events -- this dissertation will illustrate why a national and honest conversation on sensitive issues such as race and gender is so crucial at this point in time for understanding the effects of the existing racial divide and its tensions in the United States while at the same time also being very difficult to sustain for longer periods of time. I will pay special attention to how several black female celebrities such as Beyoncé, Leslie Jones, and Nicki Minaj are depicted differently, at times harshly, despite their cultural influence/significance (celebrity status) because of their gender, skin color, and bodies; in addition, the role of sexual scripts/controlling images imposed on black women will be explored. Moreover, I will look at how systemic racism has remained intact and evolved/become subtle due to colorblindness, how rhetorical frameworks of colorblind ideology have justified blacks’ secondary position in society,

¹ Maya Goodfellow describes how misogyny is normalized on Twitter.
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/02/misogynoir-how-social-media-abuse-exposes-longstanding-prejudices-against-black>

how white- and sugarcoated feminism contributes towards the disenfranchisement of minority women, and more importantly, I will also discuss President Trump's impact. Finally, I will analyze the vital yet also ambivalent role that social media play in this context by increasing the visibility of issues of race and gender while at the same time also being unable to sustain their audience's long-term attention. Yet without a comprehensive and inclusive conversation, where different opinions and perspectives are discussed on issues of race and gender on a national level, and where these issues are able to be addressed effectively, African Americans, especially black women, will unquestionably remain a disenfranchised group in the United States.

1**Get in Formation***Beyoncé's Political Stance and How Black Women Are Silenced in U.S.-Society*

In 2015 and 2016, racism and police brutality were hot-button issues in the United States. With the increase in coverage of black shootings by police officers and protests organized by the Black Lives Matter Movement in the media, public awareness on the issue of racism in the United States was heightened. Many celebrities and popstars became vocal on these problems. Some even took a political stance. Beyoncé Knowles is one of them. Her emotionally-charged performance at the Super Bowl and her music video for the song “Formation” focalized public attention on the complex intersections of racial and gender inequality as well as on the history of racial violence. Beyoncé’s performance garnered both positive as well as negative attention from scholars, social media, and politicians varying from support to backlash. A large number of the attacks on Beyoncé were misogynistic. Some critics even demanded the silencing of the popstar. These types of reactions reflect how women of color, including someone with influence like Beyoncé, still struggle to find their place and voice in society as black females. This chapter will focus on Beyoncé’s performance, the (in)effectiveness of her political statement, the history of black women being silenced, and how in contemporary U.S.-society black women have limited cultural agency.

Controversial political figure Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York City, criticized Beyoncé’s performance at the Super Bowl for being disgraceful. He found it outrageous that the popstar used the half-time show as a “platform to attack police officers” (NewPark). Giuliani also questioned the NFL for not having “decent and wholesome entertainment” and instead allowing someone with a “political position who is going to take advantage” and use the Super Bowl as a

platform to “attack the people who put their lives at risk to save us” to perform (Chokshi). This critique was aimed at the NFL and Beyoncé because her performance carried a strong theme of black empowerment and it paid tribute to the Black Panther Party. However, Beyoncé not only paid tribute to the Black Panther Party, she also tried to reclaim the history of black women during her performance.

Beyoncé was flanked by women dressed in attire that clearly resembled the image of the Black Panther female.² In an interview with *Essence* magazine, Beyoncé’s stylist Marni Senofonte defends the popstar’s sartorial choice. Senofonte argues that the “Formation” singer wanted to “honor the beauty of black women” and celebrate “the unity that fuels their power” (qtd. in Sangeweni). Senofonte and Beyoncé believe that the image of the female Black Panther best exemplifies black womanhood because “the women of the Black Panther Party created a sisterhood,” which was used to “fight police brutality” and “create community social programs” (qtd. in Sangeweni). Through fashion, Beyoncé and her backup dancers attempted to portray the image of women in leadership roles. Senofonte claims that by acknowledging Black Panther women as a “vital part of the struggle” of the Black Panthers, and the Civil Rights Movement, U.S.-American society is required to re-evaluate its bias towards the role and impact of the social movement. Therefore, Senofonte believes that the performance at the Super Bowl provoked a reaction because it served as reference to a skewed interpretation and understanding of black history which strengthens the racial divide in the United States (qtd. in Sangeweni). The image portrayed by Beyoncé and her dancers made visible racial tensions and divisions in the United States and within the African American community.

² See image of Beyoncé’s attire at: <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2016/02/12/backlash-to-beyonce-super-bowl-performance-continues-to-grow.html>

African American scholars and ministers of faith in the United States were divided on Beyoncé's performance and her music video. Noliwe Rooks, a professor at Cornell University's Africana Studies Center, argued that Beyoncé's performance at the half-time show as well as her music video sparked a conversation on topics that have remained ignored such as racial tensions and elements of Black culture that helped shape the United States. The reactions towards Beyoncé's depiction of race and gender illustrated how divided the United States still are on these topics. This divide was especially visible on social and mainstream media as Rooks asserted. Rooks believes that those who praised the popstar's performance and music video, especially black women, accepted Beyoncé's attempt to affirm the "political moment of Black Lives Mattering" and the "uplifting embrace of forms of southern Black culture", whereas those who criticized Beyoncé's performance were scrutinizing the singer for promoting racial segregation (qtd. in Falzone). Rooks concludes that this clear separation between the races indicates that race still "functions as a hard and fast dividing line" but, more importantly, that black women play a huge role in this division because "black women who perform at the Super Bowl bring simmering cultural tensions to a full boil, along with really high ratings" (qtd. in Falzone).

The polarity of black women entertainment as Rooks asserts stems from the promises of consumer culture, that is the commodification of the "Other". bell hooks argues that marginalized groups, those who have been ignored or rendered invisible, are frequently construed as the Other. The aura of intrigue surrounding this "Other" further stimulates its commodification. Consumer culture advertises the Other as enticing with the promise that "encounters with otherness" are "more exciting, more intense, and more threatening"; ultimately, its appeal is the "combination of pleasure and danger" (*Black Looks* 26). According to hooks, the appeal of commodifying Otherness stems from "the promise of recognition and reconciliation" encoded in its consumption. That is to say, when the dominant culture, i.e. white culture, demands that "the

Other be offered as sign that progressive political change is taking place,” for instance criticizing Beyoncé for promoting racial segregation, and accept the premise that “the American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference,” such as race, this in turn “invites a resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism,” which forces the acknowledged Other to “assume recognizable forms” (26). Ironically, these recognizable forms are determined by the dominant culture (i.e. whites). Undoubtedly, cultural constructions of skin color, i.e. how it is interpreted and consumed in the United States, are determined by whites. Thus, any cultural expression that deviates from recognizable forms constructed by the dominant culture is seen as threatening, especially when the narrative criticizes the norm. A good illustration of this is Beyoncé’s political stance in her performance at the Super Bowl and in her music video for “Formation”. The popstar’s black feminism and criticism towards the social and political landscape in the United States created controversy, even within the African American community.

When Beyoncé tried to empower and reclaim the history of black women at the Super Bowl and in the music video for “Formation”, many people were conflicted. This includes urban youth Minister Patrick D. Hampton. Minister Hampton argues that black women’s issues are not important Black issues. He argues instead that black women in the spotlight, such as Beyoncé, perpetuate the existing racial divide in the United States. Black women and female African American celebrities/artists take the public’s attention away from “more pressing” issues. Hampton believes that the Black Lives Matter movement and gender issues are not very relevant for the African American community. Instead, Hampton believes that “thug brutality” should become the talking point on the political agenda. The youth minister asserts that discussing black on black crime instead of police brutality is more pertinent because the Black Lives Matter Movement perpetuates the racial divide in the United States while ignoring the “challenges at-risk youths face in the street” such as gang violence. Hampton believes that when people with

influence within the African American community, such as Beyoncé, use a larger platform to discuss non-pressing issues, it contributes to increasing the racial divide. The “Formation” singer thus “ripped open another wound,” to which “America is responding” because the popstar pushed her own political agenda, instead of discussing issues affecting the black community as a whole (qtd. in Falzone). In the end, Hampton asserts that justice is more important than achieving racial harmony. However, in all other instances, the youth minister believes that racial harmony takes precedence, especially over equality of the sexes. According to Hampton, black women offer no added value in achieving racial harmony, instead they perpetuate stereotypes of the African American community because they act inappropriately when given a larger platform: “I’m tired of seeing black women on TV twerking” (qtd. in Falzone). Therefore, Hampton asserts that black women, including Beyoncé, should not be given a (media) platform because they do not actively contribute to resolving the truly relevant issues within the African American community.

This dismissal illustrates how misogynoir³ operates in subtle ways. Hampton’s dismissal and generalizations/sexualization of black women on television signify that sexism still exists and that it remains largely ignored. In many ways, Hampton’s assertion supports the longstanding argument that black womanhood is not synonymous with black identity. Author of *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks argues that the gap between these two concepts dates back to the suffragette movement. During this period, black women could not fight for equal rights because the concept of “womanhood” remained an insignificant part of “black identity”; in fact, black women were conditioned by racist and sexist socialization to devalue femaleness and regard race as the “only relevant label of identification” (1). Thus, the dismissal of sexist oppression by black men and whites devalues the impact of sexism on black women. In

³ Misogynoir describes the misogynistic racism directed at African American women, especially in visual and digital culture (qtd. in Bailey 2)

other words, Patrick Hampton's dismissal of women's issues as unimportant compared to the violence against and oppression of (mostly) African American men exemplifies how sexism, according to the levels of hierarchy in the United States, is still seen as less significant than racism. By dismissing the importance of the black female voice and denying their rights, Hampton as well as others continue to perpetuate the notion that racism is primarily a black male issue. The negative connotation associated with black women's issues and the dismissal of sexism as an important issue, contribute to the negative societal perceptions of female African Americans, especially those who are politically active. These perceptions also influence how black women are depicted in the media. These perceptions and depictions can thus precipitate aggression towards black women (Bailey 2). The reaction on social media following Beyoncé's performance is an example.

Shortly after Beyoncé performed at the half-time show, there was a slew of mixed reactions on Twitter. Some people praised her performance while others criticized Beyoncé for being anti-cop and promoting racism. Most of her critics were white. These critics view social manifestations of black separatism in U. S. society as a sign of anti-white racism, instead of an attempt by the African American community to construct a temporary "political sanctuary" where they can "escape white domination" (hooks, *Black Looks* 15). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks criticizes those who fail to acknowledge the negative implications of racism and white supremacy. She argues that by excusing "the oppressive, dehumanizing impact of white supremacy on the lives of black people" merely by suggesting that "black people are racist too" indicates that the culture remains "ignorant of what racism really is" and fails to realize that racism is a system built on domination and subjugation; in other words, "it shows that people are in denial" (15). This deniability led to people calling for a boycott against Beyoncé by

using the hashtag #BoycottBeyonce on Twitter.⁴ The hashtag became a trending topic on the social media platform.

After the #BoycottBeyonce on Twitter, an anti-Beyoncé rally was organized. This protest was initially planned to take place in New York outside of the NFL Headquarters on February 16, 2016. Protesters who wanted to join the rally could register and get their tickets for the event on Eventbrite. The invitation on Eventbrite asks: “are you offended as an American that Beyoncé pulled her race-baiting stunt at the Superbowl? [sic]” (qtd. in France). The organizer urges participants to “tell the NFL we don't want hate speech & racism at the Superbowl [sic] ever again!” by joining the rally (qtd. in France). The criticism towards Beyoncé as being racist corresponds with African American author Shelby Steele’s argument that blacks are racists as well (hooks, *Black Looks*, 16).

Steele believes that African Americans often display their racism in groups, that is, when black people choose to solely affiliate with one another. Steele asserts that this preference supports racial separatism because black people refuse to see racial differences as unimportant (i.e. the notion that everyone is equal), which ultimately contributes to their racist thoughts and behaviors (qtd. in hooks 16). In other words, Steele suggests that by acknowledging that both races are equal, racism no longer exists. Therefore, according to the author, white people who desire to interact with blacks are not “actively racist,” but rather come from a “position of goodwill” and thus should not be vilified for their actions and narrative (qtd. in hooks 16). Thus, when Beyoncé was vilified on social media, it was to expose black people’s racism and “prevent” separation between the races, and therefore the criticism allegedly comes from a *position of goodwill*. Despite the noble attempt, this particular line of thinking is flawed. The criticism on

⁴ To see a few tweets with #BoycottBeyonce go to <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/09/entertainment/beyonce-boycott-super-bowl-feat/> and <http://www.themarysue.com/owen-benjamin-beyonce-super-bowl/>

Twitter reflects the strong presence of white supremacist attitudes. The critics' emphasis on the already existing quality of the races would suggest that white supremacist attitudes are absent from the current line of thinking. By denying the existence of racism, however, the issue cannot be solved. As bell hooks asserts, "goodwill can co-exist with racist thinking and white supremacist attitudes," and as long as whites and scholars such as Steele refuse to acknowledge this co-existence, African Americans can never escape the tyranny of white supremacy (16). Thus, black people will remain in a never-ending cycle of racial oppression. Therefore, as hooks argues, many African Americans are hesitant to affiliate themselves with whites because they fear becoming the target of racist assaults. These racist assaults still occur because "most white people have not unlearned racism" and therefore fail to acknowledge that white supremacy still "manifests itself in daily social interaction" (16). This sentiment was made visible by the backlash Beyoncé received on social media, in conservative mainstream media outlets, and through the protest organized against her. Interestingly, the protest rally and the slew of criticism against Beyoncé sparked the need for other black women to speak up against these critics.

After the invitation to protest against Beyoncé was made public, a group of Beyoncé supporters organized a counter protest. Basically, those who supported Beyoncé's performance and her attempt to affirm black womanhood, wanted to organize a protest as means to send a clear message to those who accused Beyoncé of being racist. The invitation to the counter protest calls for the need to acknowledge that the rally against the popstar is an attack on and attempt to silence those (including Beyoncé) who try to combat racism and female oppression. The protest aims to highlight that African Americans continue to be the object of racist assault and that black women who affirm womanhood are silenced. The posting on Eventbrite states the following:

When Black women affirm Blackness/Black womanhood, they are attacked and silenced.

This is a counter protest to [...] a racist, ahistorical attack on the Black Panther Party and Beyoncé, plus an excuse to celebrate a very awesome song and #BlackGirlMagic moment. Sisters, dress in your "Formation" video/Super Bowl performance-inspired gear and make this moment a joyous one! Allies and friends, show up and show your support! We have asked our biggest stars to get political and Bey went there. Don't let anyone make her powerful statement about the value of Black life be overshadowed by those who don't believe that our lives matter.⁵

The posting above sends a powerful message. It makes existing issues in the United States such as the oppression of women, especially black women, visible.

Furthermore, the posting on Eventbrite serves as a reminder that despite the Civil Rights struggle, the 1960s' black power movement, and powerful slogans like "black is beautiful", which became the norm in affirming black empowerment and is still used in current African American social movements such as Black Lives Matter, masses of black people, especially black women, continue to be pressured via mass media to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values (hooks, *Black Looks*, 18). Without ongoing resistance and progressive black liberation movements for self-determination, such as Beyoncé's half-time show performance, an alternative worldview that affirms and celebrates blackness is not tolerated (hooks 18). Instead, when blackness is affirmed it is seen, mostly by white people, as promoting racism and racial separatism. This racial divide was further perpetuated by social media because they created a space for these types of discussions to take place. Interestingly, however, these discussions on social media not only highlighted the controversy of Beyoncé's performance but also raised awareness on existing racial tensions and issues of sexism in the United States. In many ways, the rhetoric of the reactions on social media as well as in the posting of the rally to support Beyoncé

⁵See post: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/get-in-formation-anti-anti-beyonce-protest-rally-tickets-3579463271?aff=efblike#>

resembled the arguments made by abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth during her address to the American Equal Rights Association in 1867.

Sojourner Truth stressed the need for the black man's right to vote as well as for granting women the same right. Truth believed that the black suffrage movement was solely focused on black male suffrage. This became evident when during the black suffrage period "white men supported giving black men the vote" while leaving "all women disenfranchised"; undoubtedly, as bell hooks argues, this support towards black male suffrage and the concomitant refusal to acknowledge white women's rights, revealed the "depths of sexism" of the white man (*Ain't I a Woman* 3). Sojourner Truth rebelled against the sexism of this patriarchal social order. Truth argued in favor of all women gaining the right to vote. Also, she emphasized that without this right to vote, black women would remain subservient to the black man. Therefore, through her speech at the American Equal Rights Association, the abolitionist and women's right activist urged the American public to understand that "sexist oppression was as real a threat" to the liberty of African American women as "racial oppression" (hooks 4). This sentiment was expressed during her address to the association in 1867. The following excerpt best encapsulates her view on the issue:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again.⁶

⁶ To see her full address, go to: <http://www.lehigh.edu/~dek7/SSAWW/writTruthAddress.htm>

Sojourner Truth's vision is still shared by many women in the African American community today. Beyoncé's performance at the Super Bowl and her music video rekindled these emotions.

The performance and the music video for "Formation" triggered repressed feelings of oppression, racism, and sexism because they focalized attention on the subtle (yet damaging) signs of racism and sexism in the United States. The dismissal of black empowerment, the denial that race is still an issue, and the spectacle of black women claiming their womanhood, by people such as Rudy Giuliani, Patrick D. Hampton, and those who called for a boycott on Beyoncé are examples. Their dismissal exemplified the so-called dog-whistle politics⁷ as it is termed. The use of dog-whistle politics served to justify the argument that gender is not as important an issue as for example race and politics. However, this argument is flawed because race and gender are inextricably interrelated. The negative reaction following the popstar's performance illustrated the tense relationship between race, separatism, and sexism in the United States.

The attempt to silence the (non-slave) black woman's voice is not a new phenomenon. Sojourner Truth and other black women who affirmed and maintained their womanhood are an earlier example. These women were silenced by not having their voices heard by the masses. As Anna Cooper stated during her address to the World Congress of Representative Women in 1893, black women "maintained ideals of womanhood unashamed by any ever conceived"; they had to face the continuous oppression of being voiceless in the nation and oppressed by the white man and woman's "untutored minds" which hindered African American females and their ideals to be

⁷ Professor Ian Haney López coined the term. It stands for a subtle political message targeting a specific demographic group, and the language can only be understood by this audience (English Oxford Dictionary).

realized because their plights were never heard (qtd. in hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 2). The mixed reactions towards Beyoncé's attempt to reclaim the history of black women and womanhood through her emotionally charged performance and music video for "Formation" illustrate how the African American female voice remains largely ignored even in the 21st century. However, and quite interestingly, a group of those who criticized Beyoncé's music video were African American women activists and scholars. They argue that while Beyoncé's ideological intent is admirable, it was not purely ideological. Instead, they argue that the Formation singer acted as a businesswoman who successfully commodified an overtly political subject matter.

Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, of which "Formation" is a track, was produced and marketed to attract all consumers, not just African American women. bell hooks asserts in her article "Beyoncé's Lemonade Is Capitalist Money-Making at Its Best" that *Lemonade* as a production is daring because of its subject matter. The positive exploitation of images of black women and their bodies, "placing them at the center, making them the norm" as well as having "diverse representations" of black female bodies contribute to the success of Beyoncé's marketing. The popstar's positive exploitation of images of African American women and racial oppression is successful because these depictions are consumed/interpreted as inspiration and black empowerment. This was the case when the hashtag #BeingABlackGirlIsLit became a trending movement on social media after the release of the music video and the performance of "Formation" at the Super Bowl. It is evident that Beyoncé's performance at the Super Bowl was considered as a "monumental cultural moment" where African Americans basked in what many described as "the joy of seeing themselves represented in a realistic way" by another black person (London). However, it cannot be denied that Beyoncé has mastered

the art of *capitalist feminism*, i.e. the upholding of the feminine struggle as means to mask capitalistic intentions and to some extent ideas that are subversive to feminism (Campbell). Thus, those who accept Beyoncé as a feminist are not critically looking at the type of feminism she is promoting, especially with regards to the depiction of black female bodies.

Beyoncé glamorizes portraits of everyday African American women by depicting them as though they are royalty. Real-life images of ordinary, differently shaped and sized, naked black women are placed within a choreographed, manufactured, and fashion-plate fantasy stylized visual backdrop. Beyoncé's visual album offers viewers a spectacle where the display of black female bodies is the main attraction. In other words, the black female body is the commodity. This type of commodification is not a new phenomenon; it stems from the times of slavery, when "black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold" (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 2). However, the type of commodification in *Lemonade* is different because of its intent. The purpose is to challenge the current "devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body" by aestheticizing the figure of African American women as well as powerfully constructing a "symbolic black female sisterhood" that "resists invisibility" and "refuses to be silent" (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 2). Undoubtedly, Beyoncé's depiction of African American women challenges how mainstream media and white mainstream culture perceives black women and their bodies. To an extent, one can argue that Beyoncé is successful in changing the interpretation of black female cultural identity. Through her performance and portrayal of the black female body, Beyoncé contributes to the dynamic of what Stuart Hall describes as cultural identity formation.

Cultural identity ... is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being." It belongs

to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.⁸

Beyoncé’s attempt to reclaim black womanhood through her performance, which *belle hooks* fails to recognize, creates a conversation on race and gender among a younger generation of blacks and non-blacks through modern technology. By challenging existing notions of female black cultural identity, Beyoncé creates a space for new narratives on race and gender to take place. With the rise of social media and its undeniable impact, in many ways, hot-button issues such as cultural identity, but also racist and sexist narratives are openly and widely discussed, criticized, perpetuated, and/or maintained.

Social media as a platform for discussions on a grander scale (at a national and an international level) cannot solely be blamed for the sexist and racial commentary following Beyoncé’s performance. Undoubtedly, social media sparked the controversy surrounding the popstar’s performance and music video for the song “Formation.” but it is not the only culprit. Women’s scholar Treva Lindsey argues that “there has never been a sustained moment of racial harmony in our nation’s history,” and therefore Beyoncé’s performance merely heightened the awareness of already “existing tensions” which allowed for a “growing public discussion around issues of race and racism” (qtd. in Falzone). Thus, the hope for racial unity on social media cannot occur if it does not exist in U.S society. As Treva Lindsey claims, social media is a platform that provides the

⁸ Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”. *Framework* 36. Pp. 222-237

necessary space for conversations to occur on a grander scale. However, the downside to social media is the ability to post messages anonymously. The ability to post anonymously allows people to fight for a righteous cause or “promote more vitriolic rhetoric”; thus, social media is a platform for racial justice activists as well as a space where people can “espouse bigotry and prejudice” (qtd. in Falzone). People who are anonymous on social media are not held accountable for their rhetoric because anonymity guarantees invisibility.

When racism is visible but its supporters remain hidden, through anonymity, the issue becomes more difficult to address effectively because a conversation cannot occur when accountability (the acknowledgement of racist rhetoric) lacks. Fortunately, when a thread is created, that is through the use of hashtags on Twitter for example, conversations on specific topics are easily traceable. Thus, when a discussion on race or gender goes viral, the content of these conversations can be accessed. In other words, proof can be provided that racism or sexism still exists in the United States. These records serve as illustration of the mindset of a group of people within a society during a particular time, which creates visibility for these issues. Conversations on social media can either maintain the racial and gender hegemony or successfully challenge it and change the power structure. In many ways, social media is thus a powerful tool in promoting change. Yet, in order to better understand how the current biases towards black people, especially black women, function, it is essential to understand the complexities of skin color politics, how colorism still operates today and why attempts at politicizing blackness and affirming black womanhood are met with fierce resistance.

2

Beauty Double-Standards in Skin Color

Complexities of Skin Color Politics among Women in the United States, its Manifestations on Social Media, and the Commodification of the Black Female Body.

Skin-color politics is a complex and important issue that has a substantial impact on the perception of race in the United States. The racial hegemony, that is the preference for whiteness/lightness in women, is clearly articulated in both social and mainstream media. Those who do not belong to the preferred category, such as darker skinned women, are criticized or at times demonized. The “casual use” of racial slurs on Twitter is a good example of this.

According to an analysis done by *DEMOS*, a cross-party think-tank, in 2012, out of a total of 126,975 tweets that were collected, on average, 10,000 offensive slurs are tweeted per day.⁹

Those who are especially targeted are women of color. Actress Leslie Jones, who received a slew of racist and sexist tweets shortly after the film *Ghostbusters* was released, as well as Shonda Rhimes, actress Viola Davis, and rapper Nicki Minaj were victims of this form of demonization.

This chapter will focus on societal perceptions of black women and the color of their skin by using Leslie Jones, Shonda Rhimes, Viola Davis, and Nicki Minaj as case studies; I will demonstrate how beauty standards determine their depiction in the media, and how the black woman’s body is commodified, objectified, and scrutinized.

In 2016, Leslie Jones became the victim of harassment on Twitter because of her appearance. Most of the negative comments were posted anonymously and displayed a striking contrast between visibility and invisibility. For years, African American women have blended in US culture and society. As Leah Milne describes it in her blog (*In*)*Visibility, Race and Ethnicity*

⁹ The study can be found at: https://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_Anti-social_Media.pdf?1391774638

in *American Women's Writing throughout the Twentieth Century*, “African American women’s (in)visibility often involves a hyper-visibility that effectively acts as camouflage” (Milne). The author refers to a famous scene in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where the argument is made that “black women are rendered both visible and invisible through their labor,” or in more modern times, their attempts at being seen, heard, and accepted, but that this (in)visibility, which is a product of “both gender and ethnicity,” is not easily recognized (Milne). In turn, this leads to a lack of awareness of the injustices that black women subsequently experience. As the blogger describes it, “everyone depends on the mule, but few recognize or value its labor” (Milne). However, this lack of recognition or awareness has shifted quite rapidly with the rise in popularity of Twitter. Thanks to the social media platform, the injustices black women experience has become more visible. The strong reactions on Twitter towards actress Leslie Jones are an illustration of an increased awareness on these issues.

The rhetoric of the negative comments Leslie Jones received on Twitter caused a huge uproar on the social media platform. These comments relied on offensive racial stereotypes and were misogynistic in nature. Jones was compared to apes by several users on Twitter. One user in particular, KKK Cool J, made reference to Harambe, the gorilla killed in an Ohio zoo, and posted its picture in reference to Jones. Others compared Jones to the fictional gorilla King Kong.¹⁰ Supporters of Jones were shocked and in disbelief at the tweets directed towards the *Ghostbusters* actress. Director of the movie Paul Feigs tweeted “Leslie Jones is one of the greatest people I know” and reiterated that “any personal attacks against her are attacks against us all” (qtd. in Silman). Several users on Twitter called for a ban of the person who is believed to have orchestrated the attack against Jones: *Milo Yiannopoulos*. He is a former editor for Breitbart, an

¹⁰ To see some of the racist tweets go to https://www.buzzfeed.com/susan Cheng/love-for-leslie-jones?utm_term=.hwRN75R4#.fg2xy0m7

organization believed to be affiliated with the alt-right, an internet based right-wing group where anonymous members create and use internet memes to express their ideologies, such as white nationalism and supremacism, traditionalism, and antifeminism. However, Yiannopoulos denies any affiliation with the right wing group and ideology. The former editor incited the aggressive targeting of Leslie Jones by resorting to insults about Jones's appearance, and in doing so, he garnered a huge following.

Supporters of Yiannopoulos continuously criticized Jones for her looks as being unfeminine and unappealing. Yiannopoulos even referred to Jones as a man when he shared a snapshot of being blocked by the actress with the comment "rejected by yet another black dude" (qtd. in Brown). Soon afterwards, a fake account of the actress was created. The anonymous creator/user posed as the actress and posted a series of homophobic and racist tweets on the fake account,¹¹ which further perpetuated the aggressive targeting of Jones. Understandably fed up, the actress shared the sexist and racist tweets she received in an attempt to deescalate the situation. Unfortunately, however, the number of negative tweets increased. As a result, Jones temporarily signed off from Twitter. On July 19th 2016, before posting her final tweet, the *Ghostbusters* actress revealed how she was affected by the experience:

It's so sad. Most of these comments sound like they are from ignorant children. I'm the source of AIDS?! WTF!! These people hate themselves. You have to hate yourself to put out that type of hate. I mean, on my worst day I can't think of this type of hate to put out. I don't know how to feel. [...] I mean, I know there is racism. But [am] I that naive to think that some things were changing? Yes, I was. We still live in a world where we have to say 'black lives matter.' I'm so tired of it. Why is this still a fight? I want to hate so bad, but I can't because I know it doesn't fix anything and just makes me sad. I'm not

¹¹ Look at the @nero tweet: <http://fusion.net/story/327103/leslie-jones-twitter-racism/>

stupid to not know racism exists. And I know it will probably live on way after me. [...] I feel like I'm in a personal hell. I didn't do anything to deserve this. It's just too much. It shouldn't be like this. So hurt right now.¹²

After a massive outpour of support for Jones, Twitter banned Yiannopoulos from using their services. However, Jones's victory was short-lived because the misogynistic sentiments by the former Breitbart-editor were shared by several others in current U.S. society. This was reflected by the actions of Yiannopoulos's supporters that followed soon after his ban from Twitter.

On August 24th, the website and personal accounts of the *Ghostbusters* actress were hacked. The hackers stole nude photos from Jones's iCloud account and posted them on her personal site, in addition to also leaking the *Ghostbusters* actress's personal information such as address, photos of her passport and driver's license and telephone number. Moreover, after the hackers also posted several racist videos on Jones's personal webpage, the comparisons to Harambe the gorilla continued to increase. The site was eventually taken down in the evening of the same day, and Homeland Security announced that it was investigating the incident. However, no details were released to the public by ICE due to a "matter of agency policy" which states that the organization is "unable to disclose any information related to an active investigation" (Levin). It is still unclear who the hackers were and what the exact purpose behind the hack was. Interestingly, the support for Yiannopoulos seemed to increase even further after the hack, and especially also after Hillary Clinton tweeted her support for Jones.¹³

The former democratic nominee's gesture of solidarity came shortly after Clinton gave a campaign speech criticizing the growing alt-right movement. In her speech, the former FLOTUS

¹² To see the full tweet: https://www.buzzfeed.com/susancheng/love-for-leslie-jones?utm_term=.cgA5wJdo#.awwR8Dmz

¹³ To read Hillary Clinton's tweet go to: <http://www.vox.com/2016/8/26/12653474/leslie-jones-hack-alt-right-culture-war>

acknowledged the existence of racial discord in U.S. politics, in the form of “a paranoid fringe in our politics, steeped in racial resentment,” and asserted that white-supremacy ideology has increased in popularity because of President Trump (qtd. in Stein). During the presidential campaign, Trump retweeted the posts of several white-supremacists. At the time, his following on Twitter was estimated at 11 million people. As a result, the alt-right movement increased in popularity because they had a powerful ally to help spread their ideologies. As Clinton asserted, this increase occurred because President Trump “amplified the voices of racists and misogynists” by encouraging their message and “giving it a national megaphone” (qtd. in Stein). The attack on Leslie Jones by Yiannopoulos and members/supporters of the alt-right movement is an illustration of the extent of their amplified voices. The harassment of Leslie Jones on Twitter and the hack and release of the actress’s personal information and private photos has garnered widespread attention by the media and politicians. At the same time, this attack was also celebrated by many white supremacists. Following the ban of Yiannopoulos and the hack of Jones’s private documents, the harassment campaign against Leslie Jones intensified and continued on another popular social media forum: Reddit.

On the thread /r/The_Donald, an alt-right page of President Trump fandom, many users kept referring to Jones as Harambe the gorilla. Others blamed Jones for Yiannopoulos’s ban, claiming that the hack and release of her nude pictures are justified. One user, in particular, DonnaGall, argued that the hack was a just retribution for Yiannopoulos’s ban because Jones had been tweeting racist comments for years. DonnaGall argued that when Jones’s feelings were hurt, the actress resorted to using the “race card and got Milo banned,” which is, according to this user, “typical liberal SJW behavior”¹⁴ and is reflected in Jones’s attitude by choosing to “play the

¹⁴ SJW stands for the pejorative term Social Justice Warrior. For a detailed definition of the term, see: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=SJW>

victim” (qtd. in Fleishman). Others asserted that Jones deserved online racist and sexist harassment because of her unattractive appearance and body.¹⁵ Such negative views of black women’s bodies contribute substantially to negative societal perceptions about Black women in general. These perceptions can precipitate racist and gendered violence that harms the physical and mental health of its victims and can even result in death. The hack on Jones was a deliberate act of cyber-violence with the intent to harm and is a vivid illustration of the racial bias that permeates U.S. media. The preference for lighter-skinned women and the demonization of darker skinned females in the U.S. media is not a new phenomenon. Moreover, the treatment Leslie Jones received supports ethnographer and professor Yaba Blay’s claim that preference for a particular skin color automatically creates privilege which translates into better (fairer) treatment.

Blay asserts that lighter skinned female African-Americans with “non-kinky hair and the ability to claim a Creole heritage,” such as Beyoncé, benefit most from this privilege (Blay). This is because those with “pretty color and good hair,” have “(relative) power” within the community (Blay). Examples of such power within the African-American community include access to educational, occupational, social, and political opportunities. Historically, lighter skinned African Americans (Creoles) have had more access to these opportunities than their darker-skinned (non-Creole) peers. As a result, the black community became divided because Creoles flourished socially, culturally, politically, and economically while the disenfranchised non-Creoles remained impoverished and oppressed. Yet, those who suffered the most were darker-skinned African American women. Since slavery, skin color differences, especially among women, have had significant implications for their life chances in the United States. Black women are particularly targeted because the “status of women in the U.S.” in general is determined by several factors

¹⁵ To see the full list of offensive commentary against Jones, see: <https://mic.com/articles/152690/leslie-jones-hack-the-alt-rights-racist-celebration-of-jones-bject-humiliation#.k4vy8xBHi>

including their appearance as “physicality is very important in how women are represented and valued” (Hunter 517). Racialized notions of beauty therefore play a huge role in the representation and value of African American women. These notions are the result of skin color stratification. The process of skin color stratification began during slavery when white males used sexual violence, including rape, as a tool of social control over African American women (Hunter 518). Interestingly, this violent method of social control produced two important effects: the creation of racially mixed Creole children -- who had white fathers and black mothers -- and the systematic privileges of these lighter-skinned blacks because of their white fathers (slave owners).

The light-skinned child’s connection to whiteness-- the slave owner-- granted him/her certain privileges by overseers or members of the slave owning family. Such privileges included “opportunities for manumission, less violent treatment by overseers, less stressful work tasks, and opportunities for skilled labor” (Hunter 518). These benefits were inaccessible to darker-skinned blacks. With regards to beauty standards, lighter-skinned African American women also had an advantage over darker-skinned black females. During slavery, phenotypical traits such as whiteness and Western-European features were considered as the epitome of beauty. Black women did not possess these features and were therefore portrayed as the “antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood,” whereas mixed-race women were usually considered as more attractive because of their phenotypical connection to whiteness (Hunter 520). As a result, this racist ideology established the prevailing definitions and moral interpretations of “African-ness” and “White-ness”. African-ness came to be associated with evil while White-ness was seen as virtuous. The impact of these definitions were enormous. Actual physical traits associated with each racial group “began to take on these ideological meanings,” thus dark brown skin, kinky hair, and wide noses themselves “started to represent barbarism and

ugliness,” whereas straight blonde hair and white skin “began to represent civility and beauty” (Hunter 519). The attack on Jones’s appearance and reference to Harambe the gorilla exemplifies this ideological interpretation of physical features. Thus, appearance shaming of darker-skinned African American women has a long history in U.S. society and has affected numerous African American women. Two additional examples include Shonda Rhimes and Viola Davis, who were also victims of racist appearance shaming and stereotyping in the media.

In 2014, a *New York Times* article “Wrought in Rhimes’s Image” by Alessandra Stanley tried to praise writer and executive producer Shonda Rhimes for her portrayal of black female leads in the television series *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*. However, this attempt backfired. Rhimes was labeled as the stereotypical “Angry Black Woman” and was questioned for casting actress Viola Davis as the lead character in *How to Get Away with Murder* because of the latter’s age, skin tone, and aesthetics (read: appeal). Stanley tried to praise the executive producer for reimagining the association with black women on television and complimented her for creating complex and well-rounded roles for African American women. Instead, her article ignited a firestorm. Stanley’s opening paragraph: “when Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called ‘How to Get Away with Being an Angry Black Woman,’” sparked a heated debate on social media. The article suggests that Rhimes embraced the “trite but persistent” stereotype of the ultimate “Angry Black Woman” and amped up the image in order to make it appealing by “recast[ing] it in her own image and [making] it enviable” (Stanley). Stanley asserts that Rhimes embraces and revamps the image of the “Angry Black Woman” by writing well-rounded characters for African-American women. However, Stanley believes that despite these well-written storylines and archetypes, Rhimes does a disservice to her African-American characters by being unconcerned about race in her shows. The critic argues that Rhimes has black female leads playing strong-willed characters who “struggle with everything

except their own identities” (Stanley). The critic illustrates Rhimes’s lack of concern with identity and race by referring to Olivia Pope and Miranda Bailey, two black female characters on the executive producer’s shows.

The article asserts that Rhimes was successful in empowering black women because she is not preoccupied with insensitivity. Stanley tried to illustrate this by referring to Viola Davis’s portrayal of Annalise Keating, the lead character in *How to Get Away with Murder*. However, she ended up offending many people, including Rhimes. Davis was described as being sexually appealing “in a slightly menacing way,” while lacking the physical features of looking like the “typical star of a network” who adheres to the “narrow beauty standards” African-American women are held to. The critic suggests that Shonda Rhimes went against the grain by casting Viola Davis (Stanley). The author emphasizes Davis’s uncommon age and skin tone as she is “older, darker-skinned,” and suggests that the *HGAM* actress is aesthetically less appealing, “less classically beautiful,” than Kerry Washington, the lighter-skinned African American lead actress in *Scandal* (Stanley). Shonda Rhimes publicly criticized the article by challenging Stanley for not listing Peter Nowalk as the creator of *How to Get Away with Murder* -- “confused why @nytimes critic doesn't know identity of CREATOR of show she's reviewing,” -- and made fun of the situation by tweeting to Nowalk “did u know u were 'an angry black woman'?” (qtd. in Fisher). Rhimes pointed out the irony and racism in Stanley’s article by referring to the lack of critique addressed to the white female leads in her other shows: “how come I am not ‘an angry black woman’ the many times Meredith (or Addison!) rants? @nytimes” (qtd. in Fisher). This biased targeting of black women is a classic example of how misogynoir in television works: African-American females are only fully accepted if they play one-dimensional characters that reinforce negative connotations and stereotypes. Stanley’s one-sided critique exemplifies how black women in the media, and even fictional characters on TV, who are well-rounded and multi-

dimensional, are considered as deviating from the norm determined by white culture. This in turn is manifested through criticism and/or backlash towards black women who do not adhere to norms (stereotypes) established by white culture on different media platforms and outlets.

In recent years, especially with the rise of social media and their effects on society, the targeting of black women in the media has started to occur more frequently. Philosopher Linda Alcoff asserts that this targeting of African American women is linked to how black women are perceived in public; racism depends on a “perceptible difference to determine which bodies are expendable,” and in this cultural moment of “black hypervisibility,” that is an increase of African-American representation in the media, black women are particularly vulnerable (*Visible Identities*). This vulnerability manifests itself especially in the existing double standards for white women and women of color in the media. White women receive less backlash than black women when showcasing their bodies, especially with regards to nudity. An example is Sharon Osbourne’s reaction towards rapper Nicki Minaj and reality star Kim Kardashian. In 2016, Nicki Minaj received criticism for her artwork “Anaconda”. Osbourne criticized Minaj’s artwork as being a “cheap porno cover of a DVD” and justified her comment by reiterating that the *The Talk* co-host is a fan of women’s bodies and nudity but found that the rapper’s artwork was cheap (qtd. in McGeorge). Shortly afterwards, Kim Kardashian posted a nude picture of herself on Instagram. Osbourne praised the image and even imitated it herself on the social media platform, admiring the way Kim Kardashian functions as an inspiration for women in celebrating and showcasing their bodies. Following this praise, Osbourne received backlash from Nicki Minaj and her fans. Osbourne was called a hypocrite for having a double standard concerning women’s bodies because of race.

Many of Minaj’s fans felt that *The Talk* co-host only praised Kardashian because she is white. Minaj shares these sentiments when telling *Marie Claire* that Osbourne’s attack on her

artwork was hypocritical because “it wasn’t trashy and raunchy when a white woman did it,” referring to Kardashian’s picture, but it was distasteful when a black woman displays her body, which is, according to the rapper, “quite pathetic and sad” (qtd. in Mock). But despite these occurrences, Minaj says that she has accepted these double standards as “my reality” to which she has “gotten accustomed to just shutting it down” (qtd. in Mock). Minaj’s experience illustrates how black women’s bodies provoke a strong reaction, even among other women. This reaction perpetuates misogynoir, particularly in visual and digital culture. The clear contrast between the responses to Minaj’s and Kardashian’s images highlight existing biases towards women of color, especially with regards to sexuality and its depiction, in the United States. This is particularly interesting because sexuality is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities.

Black sexual politics occur at the particular intersection of gender, race, and sexuality that African Americans face. For African Americans, especially black women, the relationship between race, sexuality, and gender is intensified. This in turn produces a black gender ideology that shapes ideas about black masculinity and black femininity. Black gender ideology is a set of ideas used to “justify patterns” of both “opportunity” and “discrimination” that African Americans face in society (Collins 6). The backlash Nicki Minaj received for her “Anaconda” artwork exemplifies how black gender ideology operates. Tshepo Mokoena wrote an article in *The Guardian* questioning whether the rapper’s image was “too racy for its own good,” even more so than previous images Minaj had promoted as being part of her brand, the *Jezebel* (Mokoena). Mokoena’s article further asserts that since the inception of her career, Minaj played with, while simultaneously challenging, the concept of black female lewdness through images and music. Yet, the author of the article questions whether the cover artwork for “Anaconda” is not a “step too far,” even for an artist who has “always openly courted controversy” (Mokoena).

This criticism exemplifies how sexual politics influences others' perception and treatment of women of color.

Minaj dared to challenge the boundaries set by society on what is acceptable for black women, especially with regards to sexuality and their bodies. Also, the rapper pointed out the double standards that still exist in U.S.-American society with respect to the female body¹⁶. This was illustrated by the criticism she received on social media, where Minaj was criticized for posting untastefully explicit images. The rapper retaliated by posting a series of partly nude *Sports Illustrated* covers featuring white women with the words *acceptable* as caption. Then she posted her cover artwork and captioned it with the words *unacceptable*. Minaj's criticism suggests that if black women, and their sexuality/bodies remain subordinated, social/cultural injustice persists. Therefore, Minaj rebels against the frameworks of stereotypes of the black woman/ black woman's body and its fetishization/commodification in U.S.-society while it has to be acknowledged that she at the same time also capitalizes on it.

The "Anaconda" singer has framed herself as a brand built on a spectacle which capitalizes on the sexualization of a black woman's ass. Minaj plays around with stereotypes of black women by embodying the image of the *Jezebel*. The *Jezebel* is best described as a youthful, exotic, promiscuous, hypersexualized woman who uses sexuality to get attention, love, and material goods (qtd. in Stephens 8). She is portrayed as having light skin, long hair, and a shapely body; the Jezebel was sometimes referred to as a mulatto or half-breed; myths of their insatiable sexual appetite were used to justify the rape of slave women by their masters (qtd. in Stephens 8). Minaj plays around with these concepts in her artwork, music videos, and lyrics especially in

¹⁶ To see the images, go to: <https://globalgrind.cassiuslife.com/3997616/nicki-minaj-responds-anaconda-cover-art-criticism-photos/>

“Anaconda”. She depends on a scantily clad routine and outfit and raps lyrics where she paints herself as a hypersexualized and materialistic woman:

Boy toy named Troy used to live in Detroit. Big big big money, he was gettin' some coins
 Bought me Alexander McQueen, he was keeping me stylish. Now that's real, real, real.
 One in my purse, bitch, I came dressed to kill [...] He can tell I ain't missing no meals.
 Come through and fuck him in my automobile. Let him eat it with his grills and he tellin'
 me to chill. And he telling me it's real, that he love my sex appeal. Say he don't like 'em
 boney, he want something he can grab.¹⁷

Here, Minaj perpetuates the damaging stereotype of the Jezebel while also demonstrating, through her financial success, that the black female body, unlike the white female body, is not widely celebrated. Instead, the black female body is commodified.

The commodification of the black female body started during slavery when white slave owners commoditized black bodies to sexually abuse their slaves. The female black body was defined as an object to be claimed by others to perform their desires upon. The commodification of black bodies as market objects was driven by economics, market value, and it was rationalized by claiming that “economic exchange” transformed independent beings “into human commodities” whose most socially relevant feature was “their exchangeability,” which resulted in black slaves being valued for their ability to “further [...] one’s personal agenda” and one’s “upward social mobility” instead of their possible “contributions to society” (Cooper 25). The humanity of the black body was narrowed down into a tradeable object, as means to satisfy the financial wishes of the white slave owners. As a result of this commodification, the black body was being consumed for different purposes. For instance, the black female body

¹⁷ For the lyrics to “Anaconda” see:

https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tynjgnfha4sr2msktep3sxe3jta?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics&u=0#

became an object to be used by white men in order to satiate their sexual desires, and the wives of these men would then enact their retribution on these bodies.¹⁸ Soon after, the commodification of the black female body translated into its subsequent objectification.

White slave owners and their white wives would objectify the black female body at their own will and for their own desires. This in turn led to exoticizing African American women as wild and sexually promiscuous. The exoticization of black women continues to be normalized even today by descriptors that are widely circulated, accepted, and used to frame ideas about this population (qtd. in Stephens 4). The experiences of Leslie Jones, Viola Davis, and Nicki Minaj reflect how the black female body is still seen as a commodity and objectified in contemporary U.S.-society.

When the black female body is compared to the white woman's body, the scrutiny black women face differs substantially from the criticism white women receive. Black women are held to a different, and often lower, standard than their white peers. This stems from one of the methodologies used to uphold the commodification discourse created during slavery: "traders reduced people to the sum of their biological parts" where their lives were scaled down to "an arithmetical equation" (qtd. in Cooper 25). Thus, black women's lives were only valued by their biological parts and their ability to fulfill their master's, slave-owner, sexual desires with these components. The image of the sexually exotic African woman was extremely important for the creation and maintenance of the political, economic, and social structure of the United States during this time. Sexuality became the black woman's primary value.

In current U.S.-society, beliefs and attitudes about African American women's sexuality appear to be sanctioned by a culture that continues to embrace stereotypes about race and

¹⁸ Iman Cooper explains the social hierarchies and sexual objectification of the black female body during slavery in his essay "Commodification of the Black Body, Sexual Objectification and Social Hierarchies during Slavery". Page 25

sexuality (Stephens 4). This is made especially clear when one scans media models available for women:

The good, innocent, virginal girl continues to be an idealized image of womanhood associated with white females, but unattainable for African American females.

Differentiating African American adolescent women's sexuality from white women's reinforces their positions as individuals standing on the margins of society, clarifying its boundaries. This socially constructed image of white womanhood further relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist myth that African American women are not and do not have the capacity to be sexually innocent. (Stephens 4)

These boundaries establish standards for interaction, whereby black women learn their sexual value and role expectations within the majority white culture. Depictions of African American women in the media reinforce this and provide meanings that determine interpersonal, community, and societal interactions within sexual contexts (Stephens 5). While African American women were subject to the same social expectations as white women (i.e., to fulfill the sexual needs of men, to reproduce and provide moral guidance for their respective communities), the meanings and expectations of these roles were moderated differently on the basis of women's race (Stephens 7). This is illustrated by the controlling images (sexual scripts) that were created and imposed on African American females: *Jezebel*, *Mammy*, *Welfare Mama*, and *Matriarch* (Stephens 6). These images framed black women's sexuality through the lens of white culture. Eventually, black women came to understand their position in U.S.-American society through this lens. When society was evolving, so were the categorizations of the controlling images imposed on black women.

Since the rise of Hip Hop videos -- through clothing, camera address, and visual images -- females are depicted as having both great sexual power and desires. As a result, modern and more

complex versions of the controlling images/sexual scripts have emerged: *Diva*, *Gold Digger*, *Freak*, *Dyke*, *Gangster Bitch*, *Sister Savior*, *Earth Mother*, and *Baby Mama*.¹⁹ The depiction of these sexual scripts operate to reinforce the stereotypical views held by whites, especially those with little contact with other racial/ethnic groups, as well as shape how black women view themselves. When black women adhere to any “requirements” of these established stereotypes, it becomes easy to place them in any of the above mentioned categories. The increase in categorizations, and their depictions, imposed on black women signify that it has become more difficult for African-American females to determine/claim their own identity without being influenced by the controlling images/sexual scripts. These stereotypes, and the depictions of them on television, provide guidelines for “behavior and self-concept development” because African American women viewers/consumers pay more attention to those on the screen “that look like themselves,” which is ultimately used as means by black females to gauge how they measure up against these characters (qtd. in Stephens 14). Nicki Minaj branding herself after the image of the *Jezebel* is an example. These social boxes/stereotypes are continuously (re)shaping to fit the evolving society and its needs. Without a proper conversation on these issues, and more diverse representation in the media, misogynoir cannot be appropriately addressed.

Before the rise of social media, the policing of black women’s behavior and the commodification of the black female body has remained largely undiscussed in U.S.-society. This lack of discussion contributed to maintaining the current racial hegemony and power structures. Due to the popularity and influence of social media, the visibility of these issues has increased immensely. As a result, a slight change in discourse on race and gender has occurred. Discussions on issues such as skin-color politics, the black female body, or the representation and depiction of black women in the media have become more frequent. In some cases, these conversations have

¹⁹ Stephens 15-34.

even become a political talking point as was case during the 2016 Presidential campaign.

Unfortunately, the downside of these discussions is that they have a short time span. On social media, topics of race and gender are only discussed when a remarkable event triggers reactions.

In other words, these issues are only discussed when they become a trending topic in society.

Thus, far too often, the topic of race and gender inequalities in the African-American community is discussed only when a racist or misogynoir occurrence has taken place on a larger scale (for example towards celebrities). When other issues become a trending topic, the conversation on race and gender ends. Therefore, skin-color politics and gender politics have become more complex in recent years because of the lack of a more sustained conversation in the United States on these issues. Another obstacle preventing a successful conversation on race and gender in the United States is the lack of acknowledgement. Many whites refuse to acknowledge that racism and sexism still exist. Through developing ideological justifications and explanations, whites have developed a system to avoid having conversations on controversial/sensitive issues such as race and gender. Whites shield themselves from any accusations of being racist or sexist through a colorblind approach: they deny the existence or relevance of these issues. The third chapter will discuss the ideology of colorblindness in greater detail.

3

War on Colorblindness*The Influence of Donald Trump on Racist and Sexist Rhetoric and on Maintaining Colorblindness as Hegemony*

Since the Civil Rights Movement, race has almost become a taboo subject. In contemporary society, whites often refuse to talk about race, with many arguing that race is no longer relevant. Others assert that they fear being labelled racist, therefore they refrain from having a conversation altogether. As a result, issues of race in the United States have remained largely ignored for long periods of time. This changed when Donald Trump ran for president. The controversy and shock-factor surrounding the rhetoric of the 45th POTUS increased the visibility of issues that had been ignored for years such as sexism and racism. As a result, a conversation on these topics was sparked. While extremely unconventional and unprecedented, Trump's candidacy has been key in bringing awareness to race relations and issues on gender in The United States. This chapter will focus on the Trump campaign, how colorblindness plays a role in maintaining racial inequalities, and how Trump's influence maintains the colorblind ideology and racial inequalities intact.

The current President of the United States and business mogul Donald Trump has challenged the notion of political correctness and sparked a heated debate on questions regarding appropriateness and boundaries in rhetoric by his comments on hot-button issues such as immigration reform, race and crime, gun-control, and violence. Many of Trump's opponents felt that the real estate tycoon's narrative was antagonistic and divisive during the presidential campaign. For example, when Trump was accused of using dog-whistle politics. During one of the presidential debates, the commander-in-chief arguably tried to instill fear by reiterating the dangers Hispanics and the African-American community living in inner-cities face: "African-

Americans, Hispanics are living in hell because it's so dangerous" (qtd. in Vega). According to Ryan Lauth, a communications professor at Northwestern University, the idea of "inner cities" invokes a particular image of "white flight," which refers to white people "escaping decaying urban areas" in hopes of relocating to what they considered "safer suburbs" (qtd. in Vega). Lauth asserts that the term inner city is used to invoke fear in voters residing in rural and suburban areas who wish to elect an official who will prevent crime from spreading. However, not everyone agrees with this perspective. Heather MacDonald, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, criticizes those who accuse Trump of dog-whistle politics, asserting that Trump's critics are missing the point: "He's not assuming that all blacks and Hispanics live in inner cities, he's saying in urban areas crime is extremely high," and she wonders why the commander-in-chief's rhetoric is considered racist: "you can't talk about crime without being called a racist?" (qtd. in Vega). MacDonald's point about being called racist will be discussed in more detail below, but the varying viewpoints illustrate the strong divide between different groups in U.S.-society on these issues.

It was in particular liberals and democrats who accused Trump of mounting a campaign of snarl and sneer instead of substance. In "Donald Trump Is a Unique Threat to American Democracy," the Editorial Board of *The Washington Post* argued that the business mogul's politics were denigrating and divisive, and the authors feared that President Trump could "strain the bonds that have held a diverse nation together" (Editorial Board). Conservatives, on the other hand, hailed Trump as the anti-establishment hero. Trump voters believe that the real estate tycoon will "serve the people instead of a political system that wants to serve itself" (Fishwick). Also, despite the current commander-in-chief's online as well as offline rhetoric during the presidential campaign, which was continuously criticized in mainstream and liberal media, many voters felt that Trump is honest. Voters recognize that Trump "may say controversial things," but

they also feel that the POTUS “tells you what he thinks” (Fishwick). This direct approach invokes a feeling of certainty among Trump supporters: “I know where I stand with Trump” because “he says what he thinks, right or wrong, and I know what I’m dealing with,” and one of the interviewees, Paul, concludes that “Trump is exactly what you get,” meaning that there are no façades, whereas, with Hillary Clinton, “you can’t know what’s real” (qtd. in Fishwick). Interestingly, Trump voters maintain this position even though they do acknowledge that the commander-in-chief has spouted racist and sexist rhetoric, especially after the misogynistic comment made in 2005.

On October 8th, 2016 *The Washington Post* released a recording of Donald Trump having extremely lewd conversations about women with former host of *Access Hollywood* Billy Bush in 2005. In the recording, Trump promoted the sexual assault of women. Trump believed that having influence in society, such as being a celebrity, granted the individual unlimited power: “when you’re a star [...] you can do anything” (qtd. in Fahrenthold). According to Trump, “anything” included kissing, groping, and having sex with women without their consent.²⁰ After the tape was released, Donald Trump tried to shift the focus away from the issue by justifying his words as being “locker-room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago” (qtd. in Fahrenthold). This rhetoric not only shocked the United States, but it sparked a heated conversation on sexism and what it entails. News outlets, talk shows, politicians, and even Trump supporters were divided on the issue. Many criticized Trump for his controversial remarks about women and locker-room talk and as a result questioned his aptitude of becoming president. As damage control, Trump tried to downplay the incident during the second presidential debate on October 9, 2016. He apologized for his actions by stating: “I’m not proud of it, I apologize to my

²⁰ The full quote, which includes explicit language, can be found at 01:25 of the video posted by *The Washington Post*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html

family; I apologize to the American people” (qtd. in Fahrenthold). While still referring to the commentary as being “locker room talk,” he also scathingly attacked former POTUS Bill Clinton for alleged sexual misconduct: “what he’s done to women there’s never been anybody in the history of politics in this nation who’s been so abusive to women” (Bradner). Despite this attempt, many women in the United States were appalled by his comments, including former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama.

Mrs. Obama offered a rebuke to Trump’s comments in a speech on October 14th, 2016, in New Hampshire. During the speech, Michelle Obama considered Trump’s language in the 2005 recording hurtful, hateful, demeaning, and shocking. FLOTUS points out how in the recording, a “candidate for president of the United States” has bragged about “sexually assaulting women,” which is something that has “shaken me to my core” in an unexpected way (“Full Speech”). Michelle Obama made a plea to the audience and viewers, to not ignore the situation: “it’s not something we can just sweep under the rug” as just “another disturbing footnote in a sad election season” (“Full Speech”). She asserted that Trump, as well as his supporters, should not get away with the justification that the comments made in the 2005 recording were simply lewd or locker-room banter. Instead, Michelle Obama argued that the issue is about a “powerful individual” who speaks “freely and openly about sexually predatory behavior” as well as “bragging about kissing and groping women” by using extremely obscene language (“Full Speech”). Mrs. Obama describes the feeling that Trump evoked with his comments as cruel and frightening because of the belief that men can do anything to a woman without consequence. While her plea was powerful, and a number of Trump supporters were appalled by the comments made by the business mogul, the support for the Republican nominee nevertheless remained strong. Interestingly, however, it should be noted that both supporters and non-supporters of Trump were more appalled by the rhetoric than by the action itself. In other words, they were more concerned

about using the term sexist or sexual assault than about committing the actions associated with the term. Commentaries given by Trump supporters reflect this sentiment.

In the segment “Jordan Klepper Fingers the Pulse - Donald Trump's Locker Room Talk” for *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* on YouTube, Trump supporters were asked about their opinion on the locker-room talk and Trump’s use of the term. Many initially defended the real estate tycoon for acting like a regular guy, “that’s what boys do,” with one female supporter arguing that worse comments about women have been made (*The Daily Show* 1:15-1:26).

Interestingly enough, even when Jordan Klepper, the interviewer, cleverly challenged the premise that sexually assaulting women is locker-room talk, Trump supporters would not change their minds. At the end of the interview, one male supporter asserted that some women would “love to have their pussies snatched by Trump,” and concluded that “one man’s sexual assault is another man’s flirtation” (*The Daily Show* 3:00-3:12). This last commentary reflects two interesting sentiments. Firstly, Trump and his supporters, unconsciously, illustrated how easily dismissible sexist rhetoric is in the United States. Without a second thought, they swept it under the rug as playful banter. The second, and most important, point is that the uproar or concern is greater about being labeled an aggressor, in this case someone bragging about sexual assault, than actually committing the act itself. Interestingly, this concern of being accused is especially prevalent in U.S.-society on issues relating to race.

As was mentioned above, during the presidential campaign, Trump emphasized how inner cities are the most dangerous areas in the United States. The commander-in-chief’s rhetoric was heavily based on pathos, a rhetorical strategy that attempts to persuade its audience by evoking reactions through the use of emotions such as sadness, fear, pity, and/or anger. Trump continuously reiterated how “the ongoing catastrophe of crime” is most prevalent in inner cities, how “our inner cities are rife with crime,” and he compared the high crime rate in these areas to

“an epidemic of violence” which “destroys lives, communities, and opportunities for young Americans” (NewsThisSecond). These words evoked fear about crime, concern about the issues in inner cities, and persuaded people living in these areas that it is best to move away. Trump was successful in sparking fear about crime in these areas and as a result gained support from voters and received praise from conservative media. Unsurprisingly, the business mogul also received backlash from democrats, liberals, and several media outlets. The main criticism of Trump was that he used coded language, i.e. dog-whistle politics/racial appeal, to make his racist remarks less obvious. Ian Haney-Lopez, the professor who coined the term dog-whistle politics, asserts that Trump uses inner cities as a “proxy for language” which is meant to “trigger negative images” of minorities, especially “people of color” (qtd. in Vega). However, it is difficult to assess whether this is the case. As Heather Macdonald asserted, critics are too concerned about the use of language and, as a result, run the risk of missing the point that is being made, which is that the crime rate in urban areas is extremely high.

Macdonald raised an interesting point about whether white people can have a conversation on race without being called racist. Macdonald’s point reflects how colorblindness in the United States has created a culture of fear where people cannot talk about race – and especially about problems related to race – without being called racist. As a result, the desire to sidestep or even ignore race in favor of a colorblind approach has permeated the cultural ethos in the United States. This reflects *The Daily Show* host and South-African comedian Trevor Noah’s sentiment. Noah argues in “Trevor Noah: Trump Is Racist” that the United States needs to invent a “racism Richter scale” because “racism in America is such a loaded word” that people are more concerned about “being called racist” than “actually being racist” (ABC News). The comedian asserts that people might admit to racist behavior but refuse to be labelled as such: “I might do these things, but you don’t call me racist” (ABC News). Due to a lack of a more nuanced

discourse, white people lack the knowledge that there are levels of racism. Trevor Noah's take on how to address issues on race and why it is essential to discuss this topic in the United States is interesting.

In "Trevor Noah on Pres. Trump, Racism in America, & More" on *The View*, Noah argues that racism should be treated like a disease. He compares racism to alcoholism, an addiction that is acknowledged as a problem (disease) that should be treated: "you've got a problem, we need to help you" (*The View* 5:27-5:40). Noah explains that racism is "hereditary" because it is passed down from generation to generation: "you teach it to your children" (*The View* 5:40-5:50). However, he also adds that by quickly dismissing racism and racists, or shunning people who are racists, instead of addressing the issue itself, the problem does not disappear: "where would they [racist people] go" and why "would they change"? (*The View* 5:50-6:00). Instead, the issue becomes bigger, more complex, and more difficult to solve: "all you're doing is piling people in a group" which ends up being counterproductive in terms of eradicating racism (*The View* 6:00-6:10). As Marianne Modica argues, colorblindness, or the attempt of not seeing race, does not end racism; in fact, "ignoring race increases the likelihood that racism will occur" in different facets of society (Modica). This results in a paradox where the majority of whites in the United States assert that racism is unimportant or has disappeared while racial discrimination continues on many levels. Modica claims that this paradox exists because white people have "developed a new racial ideology" called colorblind racism (Modica). The ideology of colorblindness, a term that was coined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, is a powerful tool because it allows whites to ignore existing issues on race, dismiss the existence of racism (or rather blame it on the overly sensitive perception of non-whites), and maintain their own privilege. This can be seen for example in the discourse and policies of political leaders in the United States, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.

Bonilla-Silva asserts that white politicians use colorblind ideology as a safeguard to enunciate their racial interests and positions on race without sounding or being called racist. For example, political leaders claim to support diversity in higher education while simultaneously invalidating social policy aimed at rectifying the history of racism in the United States (such as affirmative action). These strategies illustrate Bonilla-Silva's claim that whites have developed a strong rhetoric, oftentimes in the form of justifications, for contemporary racial inequality that "exculpate[s] them from any responsibility" for the position of "people of color" (Bonilla-Silva 2). For example, racial minorities including blacks are three times more likely to be poor than whites and/or have higher rates of unemployment. Many African Americans have limited access to good education, even when they attend integrated institutions. Those who are highly educated are steered into "poorly remunerated jobs" or "jobs with limited opportunities for mobility" (Bonilla-Silva 2-3). People of color are racially profiled by the police, receive impolite treatment in a host of commercial venues, and have less access to the entire housing market because of "exclusionary practices" by white realtors and homeowners who have limited African Americans' entry into many neighborhoods (qtd. in Bonilla-Silva 2). These practices and restrictions of mobility are subtle and new ways of keeping minorities in secondary position. In this way, the status quo is preserved. Yet, despite these occurrences, whites still claim that race is no longer relevant. There is a contradiction between the asserted color blindness of whites and color-coded inequality in the United States. This contradiction is the result of "updated" racist practices that are more subtle, institutional, and, supposedly nonracial. Thus, whites rationalize the contemporary status of African Americans as being "the product of market dynamics," a normal occurrence, and "imputed cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva 2). In other words, whites refuse to acknowledge that discriminations against African Americans occur because of systemic racism.

Color blindness is an ideology with its own peculiar linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (race talk) that contribute to subtle and supposedly nonracial narratives about minorities, especially in public venues. For example, statements like “I am not racist, but ...” or “I am not black, so I don’t know” are used very carefully in order to avoid being called racist. As Bonilla-Silva termed it, the “style of an ideology” is the thread used to “join pieces of fabric into garments” (53). Bonilla-Silva argues that the “neatness of the garments” depends on the situation (location) in which they are “being stitched,” meaning that if the statement is articulated in a public venue or open space, i.e. in the media, “dominant actors” will “weave its fibers carefully,” whereas if the “needlework is being done among friends,” the trims will be uneven and “the seams loose” (53). Thus, rhetorical practices pertaining to color blindness are strategically subtle and nuanced in order to make racism and racist narratives less visible to the public eye.

However, by talking about minorities in public in a very careful, indirect, hesitant manner and, at times, through coded language, the current (institutionalized) state of racial inequality is not being challenged; in fact, color blindness further perpetuates the divide between the races and consequently maintains the current white hegemony as status quo. Whites construct their accounts and interpretations of race with the linguistic and rhetorical tools accessible in a largely colorblind United States. These tools are the frames, style, and stories determined by the color blindness ideology. By using these tools, whites construct their accounts and interpretations often in a mostly unconscious fashion. Stuart Hall argues this by pointing out that individuals are continuously making use of a collection of “frameworks of interpretation and understanding,” oftentimes in a very “practical unconscious way” that determines and shapes how we interpret our surroundings, that “enable[s] us to make sense of what is going on around us,” and how we react to it, “what our position is, and what we are likely to do” (qtd. in Bonilla-Silva 53). Thus, color blindness has created a particular framework according to which whites have developed a

concealed way of voicing racial views which heavily relies on strategically managed propositions. Those include, for instance, apparent denials (“I don’t believe that, but...”), claims of ignorance (“I don’t know”), use of disclaimers (“I didn’t mean that because, as I told you, *I am not racist*”), discursive buffers (“some of my best friends are black”), or even shifting the blame (“blacks are racist too”). The last strategy, shifting blame, is mostly used on social media. The boycott on Beyoncé that was discussed in the first chapter is an example of this strategy.

When Beyoncé was accused of being “race baiting” because of her performance at the Super Bowl in 2016, the accusers were strategically trying to deflect from the situation in order to refrain from discussing issues of race. Talking about and acknowledging racial inequalities and race relations while being called racist is awkward and painful. Yet, it is essential in order to create possibilities for changing the status quo. Color blindness as ideology has become dominant because most members of U.S.-society (both dominant and subordinate) have accommodated their views to it. Bonilla-Silva believes that colorblind racism has affected African Americans indirectly in such a way that blacks have not yet been able to develop an “all-out oppositional ideology” against this dominant ideology (153). According to Bonilla-Silva, most blacks have accepted colorblind racism, and its consequences, as the norm. One of Bonilla-Silva’s African American interviewees perfectly summed up the best explanation for colorblind racism as ideology: it is a choice. The interviewee, Carla, argues that the current status quo will not change because whites “only do what they want to do,” and those who wish to challenge the status-quo will not succeed: “you can tell them and stress it,” but if those who conform to the dominant ideology decide not to act upon this plea, the power structure remains unchanged: “if they choose not to, they won’t” (qtd. in Bonilla-Silva 153-157). This is further illustrated by former attorney general Eric Holder’s argument.

Holder asserts that the United States has willfully contributed to the divide between the races by avoiding the topic of race relations/racial inequalities. The former attorney general believes that the U.S. was supposed to become “more prosperous” and more “positively race-conscious” after the Civil Rights Movement (Thomas and Ryan). According to Holder, unfortunately this did not happen. He claims that the nation has become “voluntarily socially segregated” because it is too easy “not to talk about these things [race issues]” due to the fact that race is considered a “painful thing” to discuss (Thomas and Ryan). Therefore, Holder believes that the United States is a “nation of cowards” when it comes to “race relations” because average Americans lack “the guts” to have an open and honest conversation on “many unresolved racial issues in this nation” (Thomas and Ryan). While Holder makes compelling arguments, both the former attorney general and others who share his perspective miss a pivotal element in their assertions. The resistance to address race is not a question of fear or honesty; rather it has to do with the rhetoric framed by the ideology of colorblindness. A good example of this is “All Lives Matter” as a response to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the belief that *racism is a thing of the past*. Whites who oppose the motto “Black Lives Matter” criticize it because they believe that the social movement singles out a race and devalues the lives of other races (such as whites). The second example, “racism is a thing of the past,” suggests that race is no longer an issue in U.S.-society. These blanket statements are undoubtedly problematic because they illustrate that critical thinking on issues of race in the United States can very easily be dismissed.

When whites are challenged to look at race and racism objectively in the United States, they are confronted with the reality that colorblindness is actually an umbrella term for white privilege, as whites have “the luxury” of not “paying attention to race” and thus are able to ignore race (Halstead). A critical conversation on the issue of race pushes whites out of their comfort zone, i.e. the false reality of equality, created by color blindness. The rhetoric of *not seeing color*

is thus seen as an ideal by whites; colorblindness becomes a shield against possible repercussions as a result of discussing race issues (i.e. being called racist). Therefore, racist rhetoric is safeguarded because color-blind racism is subtle. This subtlety makes it difficult for whites who are not conscious of their implicit bias to acknowledge that the connotations of their colorblind narratives are racist.

The conceptual analysis of color-blindness gives a deeper understanding and aids in interpreting Trump's take on race during the presidential campaign. While Trump raised an interesting point about inner-cities being rife with crime, the commander-in-chief failed to acknowledge that these harsh conditions are the result of systemic racism. By not acknowledging that racial minorities are restricted from/have limited access to the same benefits as whites such as housing, education, and mobility, the inner cities cannot be helped. The lack of conversation on issues of race is because a large number of whites fail to acknowledge that racism is still an issue in the United States or publicly admit that they have a bias towards people of color. Trump exemplifies this. When *CNN* news anchor Don Lemon asked Trump whether he was racist, the business mogul asserted that he was not: "I am the least racist person that you have ever met" (qtd. in Scott). Yet, during a private conversation with his golf companions, the real estate tycoon objectified black women and referred to them as *niggers*: "have you ever fucked a nigger."²¹ These contradictions reflect Bonilla-Silva's claim that in public venues narratives about race are subtle and nuanced whereas in private, among a close group of friends, the rhetoric is unfiltered. Trump's discourse and lack of accountability for his comments are shaped by the frameworks of color blind ideology as described by Bonilla-Silva. Donald Trump has great influence both politically as well as culturally in the United States. By subscribing to the color blind ideology,

²¹ Actor Don Cheadle confirmed on Twitter that this conversation took place <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2017/3/5/1640286/-Actor-Don-Cheadle-Says-that-Donald-Trump-Referred-to-Black-Women-as-N-ers>

Trump (unconsciously) asserts that the status quo should be preserved. As a result, the message becomes clear: the racial power structure in the United States should not be changed anytime soon.

The White Feminist Voice

Intersectionality and The Need for Diversity in Opinions

African American women have since slavery been the victims of systemic racism and sexism. Issues affecting black women have remained largely invisible and ignored for years. Fortunately, since the rise of social media, many issues in U.S.-society, including racism and sexism, have become more visible and discussed more frequently. Conversations on feminism and reclaiming womanhood have increased immensely in the past 10 years, for instance, when Beyoncé performed at the Super Bowl and when Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton presented herself as a pioneer for women, an avid feminist, claiming to want to *break the glass ceiling*²² in her concession speech for women in the United States. However, despite these strides in the right direction, black women remain excluded from enjoying the same benefits as their white peers. This chapter aims to illustrate how white feminism still fails to represent all women.

When Leslie Jones was harassed on Twitter, Hillary Clinton sent her a supportive, albeit vague, tweet. The Democratic presidential candidate did not address the issue of misogyny on a bigger platform. Interestingly, this is in stark contrast with how Clinton reacted to Trump's lewd comments about wanting to grope a white woman in the audio that was leaked by *The Washington Post*. During the second presidential debate, Clinton recounted a list of Trump's offenses against women that varied from hurling insults at Rosie O'Donnell and Megyn Kelly -- "we have seen him insult women" and "embarrass women on TV and on Twitter" -- to body shaming women such as Alicia Machado, a former Miss Universe: "we saw him" after the first

²² Hillary Clinton used this metaphor to illustrate generally existing inequalities between the two genders in the United States. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hillary-clintons-progress-shatter-highest-hardest-glass-ceiling/story?id=43420815>

presidential debate “spend a week denigrating a former Miss Universe in the harshest, most personal terms” (de Moraes). The offenses that were listed by Clinton only encompassed slurs against white women. Attacks against black females were not mentioned, such as when Trump sexually objectified black women with his golf companions. This is merely one example, but it vividly illustrates how sexism towards black women still remains largely ignored, especially in feminism.

Issues that minority women, including African American females, face are often not discussed by “avid” feminists who are white. Quite often, white feminists still fail to acknowledge existing inequalities between white and black women in U.S.-society. The Women’s March on Washington after Trump’s inauguration is an example. The Women’s March received backlash from minorities for being hypocritical and insensitive. This protest was the first female-centric protest in decades during which a large number of white women were present. While admirable, many minority women including Latinas, Asian women, and black women criticized the march for being extremely white-centric.²³ Many argued that the protest only occurred because white women were angry about the outcome of the election. Iljeoma Oluo’s tweet reflects this sentiment:

Where have you been? Where have y'all been? Why is this your first protest? I cannot put into words how heartbreaking it is to see grown adults that I know and love decide only now to take to the streets. I'm glad you're there. I'm glad you're doing something. But weren't we enough? Weren't we worth it before? Why weren't we reason enough? Where have you been? And where will you be once this doesn't impact you directly anymore?²⁴

²³ As described by Jessica Xiao. See: <https://extranewsfeed.com/what-is-white-feminism-8f376360a59>

²⁴ The tweet can be found in Xiao’s article.

The tweet above cleverly points out the inattentive ignorance of those white women who have not previously participated in activism. Even today, white feminism still lacks the internalization of intersectionality, which creates a space for false assumptions of equality like African American women being able to reclaim black womanhood, the eight controlling images/sexual scripts imposed on black women discussed in the previous chapter, and Hillary Clinton's *break the glass ceiling* motto (meant as a space of inclusiveness for all women). These false equivalencies are examples of *sugarcoated* feminism, which is the attempt to unite women by choosing to ignore their differences.²⁵ Similar to the colorblind ideology, this type of feminism rests upon what is perceived as comfortable "performative allyship" rather than addressing the actual, and often painful, facts and realities.

Feminism has been criticized, since the suffragette movement, for being designed by and catered specifically toward white women. During that period, white feminists had been guilty of using unarticulated racial components in their claims: "regardless of whether they used racial modifiers, ideas about race difference were always present, even if race functioned as an absent presence, as it so often did" (Newman 61). Ever since the suffragette movement, there exist two interdependent gender roles that are delineated along racial lines: black women should, because of their "moral degradation", be pitied, not respected, whereas the white woman, through her compassion for her black peer, must embody the role of the "empowered, sanctified uplifter" (Newman 66). White feminism rests on the premise that women's political authorship is a "natural extension of a white woman's moral authority" (Newman 77). Currently, this mindset is preserved in the usage of similar frameworks such as that of the color blind ideology to frame racial differences between black and white women as unimportant in order to guarantee that the power structures, the moral and political authority of white females, remain unchanged in society.

²⁵ A term used by Jessica Xiao

Conclusion

Radical and transformative change can only occur once the intersectionality of race and gender is acknowledged and an honest and sustained conversation takes place. Until then, black women will remain disenfranchised because of their race and gender. When African American women are criticized or silenced when they challenge the status quo, it sends the message that the black female voice is culturally unimportant. Consequently, this contributes to maintaining misogynistic frameworks that are used to control and reinforce stereotypes of black women, including images of the *Angry Black Woman* and the *Jezebel* as well as more recent sexual scripts such as the *Diva*, *Gold Digger*, *Freak*, *Dyke*, *Gangster Bitch*, *Sister Savior*, *Earth Mother*, and *Baby Mama* (Stephens). Popular culture, such as hip-hop videos, has played an important role in maintaining and reinforcing these stereotypes. Fortunately, in recent years, there has been an increase in resistance towards these scripts.

Beyoncé attempted to reclaim black womanhood while supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement at the Super Bowl in 2016 and in her music video for “Formation”. This is significant because the popstar sparked a conversation on blackness, black womanhood, racism, and sexism on a larger scale. Her performance, and the reactions towards it, caught the attention of the mainstream media, of white authority figures, and white politicians. Despite the outpour of criticism against her, Beyoncé accomplished something pivotal: she was successful in focalizing issues that had been ignored in U.S society for years. Unfortunately, soon after, the urgency surrounding blackness and black womanhood dissipated. Afterwards, it became evident how deeply rooted stereotypes against black women and their rhetoric are in the culture of the United States. The attacks against Leslie Jones and Nicki Minaj illustrate this.

When Jones was harassed on the social media platform Twitter, it reflected how the role and perception of the black woman has remained, largely, unchanged since slavery. African American females have always been the target of scrutiny, the *bottom of the barrel* as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, as well as the main victim of sexual objectification. Nicki Minaj's career (even though it is mostly successful) and brand as the *modern day Jezebel* exemplify how black women are perceived in contemporary society. Nicki Minaj's embodiment of the overtly promiscuous and materialistic black girl, especially in "Anaconda" and its subsequent consumption -- listening to and buying her music, analyzing/criticizing her artwork, and looking at her music video -- suggests that sexual scripts/controlling images imposed on black women are still powerful. When black women such as Nicki Minaj and Shonda Rhimes point out the hypocrisy in contemporary U.S. society -- the double standards framing the perception of white women vs black women -- they are automatically shut down, including by other white females. However, when confronted about racial double standards or racist rhetoric, many whites frequently deny any responsibility by hiding behind the shields of colorblindness and sugarcoated feminism. As a result, a conversation on issues of race and gender does not occur and the power structure remains intact. President Donald Trump in particular has contributed to preserving the white hegemony by subscribing to the color blind ideology and through his controversial reign as president.

Black women in the United States still lack political as well as cultural agency in many areas. The controlling images, damaging and sexist stereotypes, and negative depictions in the media have all contributed to the silencing of the African American female voice. Therefore, it is imperative that an open, sustained and inclusive conversation -- where whites and blacks come together -- occurs. Social media can initiate such a dialogue, but, as has been demonstrated, it then needs to be picked up by mainstream media as well, otherwise the dialogue will only have a

short attention span and is in danger of fizzling out before any real, structural change has occurred. Change will never take place if whites and blacks do not acknowledge that sexism and racism still exist and that they play a role in preserving the power structure and social hierarchy. Without this type of discourse, the racial and gender gap in the United States will only increase.

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